



# Liver Transplant

## What is a liver transplant?

A liver transplant is the replacement of your liver with one that has been donated by someone else. The donated liver comes from someone who has died. In the future, it may be more common for donated liver tissue to come from a living person, such as a family member. In this case, you receive only a part of the donor's liver.

## When is a liver transplant considered?

Liver transplants are considered only when there is a high risk of death from liver disease. Usually, more than one doctor will help decide if you need a liver transplant. Being told you might need a liver transplant doesn't automatically mean that you are in danger of dying right away. It usually takes a long time to find a liver that is right for you. For this reason, your doctor might try to decide whether you need a liver transplant months or years before you actually must have one.

## What might make my doctor think I need a liver transplant?

Your doctor might think about giving you a liver transplant if you have any of the following symptoms, and they don't go away with time:

- Yellowing of skin and/or whites of eyes (called *jaundice*)
- Fluid in your legs (*edema*) or in your belly (*ascites*)
- Thinning of your muscles, especially in your face, neck and arms
- Easy bruising or bleeding
- Vomiting blood, or passing blood in your stool
- Times when you can't concentrate or become easily confused
- Changes in your liver tests that suggest your liver is failing

## Can anyone get a liver transplant?

No. Getting a liver transplant is very stressful. Not everyone who needs a liver transplant can survive the major surgery involved. In some cases, your doctor might decide that the liver transplant probably won't work.

If your doctor thinks you might need a liver transplant, then you should do everything you can to keep healthy and strong. Some of the things that might *prevent* you from being allowed to have a liver transplant include

- continuing to use alcohol or illegal drugs
- being at high risk of using drugs or alcohol again after the surgery
- being unable to follow your doctor's instructions, like taking your medicine when you are supposed to
- having too little support from people at home to care for you after the operation
- having advanced cancer of the liver
- having had another kind of cancer in the past 3 to 5 years
- having severe heart, lung or kidney disease
- having advanced HIV disease (AIDS)
- having severe hardening of the arteries

### **What can I do to keep healthy before and after a liver transplant?**

If you follow the suggestions below, you can improve your chances of getting a liver transplant and of feeling healthy after surgery. Some of these suggestions might also keep you from needing a transplant for a longer period of time:

- Do not use alcohol or illegal drugs. Get treatment for substance abuse problems
- Get treatment for any mental illness or behavioral problems
- Make sure you follow your doctor's advice to try to treat your liver disease
- Eat well-balanced, healthy meals. Lose weight, if your doctor tells you to
- Get treated for any other health problems (diabetes, blood pressure, high cholesterol, etc.)
- Stop smoking or chewing tobacco
- Talk to your doctor before you use any other prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, supplements or herbal remedies

### **What is life like after a liver transplant?**

Most people who get liver transplants go back to having a full and active life. Most of them live for many years. If you have a liver transplant, some things will be different. You will have to take medicine every day to make sure that your body doesn't reject your new liver. You will have to see your doctor often, and learn to work well with the people on your health care team. You might need to keep getting treated for your liver disease or for alcohol or drug use.

You might also have some new problems. Some people who get transplants have trouble with diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and occasional infections. Your doctor can help you deal with these problems, if they occur.

### **If I have HCV, will it come back in the new liver?**

Yes. But new treatments for HCV are available to prevent HCV from damaging your new liver as much as your old one.

### **Can I get a liver transplant through the VA health care system?**

Yes. The VA has a long history of successful liver transplants. It has special centers, called Centers of Excellence, where the doctors are liver transplant experts. If your VA doctor decides you might need a liver transplant, you will be referred to one of these centers.

### **Who can I call for more information?**

- **Your local VA medical center**  
and visit <http://www.va.gov/hepatitis>
- **The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)**  
(888) 4HEPCDC [(888) 443-7232] and visit <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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